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Spy leaks: striking out might

WASHINGTON — Now that the smoke of dubious battle has cleared from William Casey's successful struggle to survive as CIA director, Reagan officials are trying to assess the real damage and determine what can be done to repair it.

Contrary to assurances that this episode has passed harmlessly away like a brief summer storm, President Reagan's ability to deal with foreign threats has been seriously weakened. As one Western European intelligence official remarked, "You have become a laughing stock among your enemies and the despair of your friends."

He was not referring to the incidental damage done to the reputation of individuals involved in this affair but to the institutional wreckage left behind by the exposure of the first attempt by the Reagan administration to mount, via the CIA, a covert action operation of some size and significance.

Whether the operation was aimed at strengthening the opposition to Col. Khadafy's dictatorial rule in Libya or directed at reducing Khadafy's influence in some other African country, the unhappy fact remains that such an operation was exposed even before the House and Senate Intelligence Committees had completed their secret review.

To guard against just this kind of security breach, the law providing for congressional oversight of the CIA covert action was amended last fall to reduce from eight to two the number of committees that have to be informed. The hope was that behind the closed doors of the intelligence committees, with their good reputation for security, congressional reservations about any secret project could be resolved without devastating publicity.

That hope has now been proved illusory.

Although the identity of the leakers is not yet known, the chronology and content of their revelations throw a good deal of light on their motivation. Just as Casey was reeling under senatorial criticism for his appointment of the hapless Max Hugel, his judgment was brought further into question by a press story that the House Intelligence Committee had taken the unusual step of warning the president in writing against a covert operation in Africa that Casey had approved.

Compounding the damage, the next leak charged that the secret plan called for an escalating paramilitary campaign against Khadafy, and his possible assassination. Although Hugel had alarmed the House committee in his presentation, White House staffers, congressional sources and intelligence officials are convincing in their unanimous denial that the plan itself contained any authorization for assassination or paramilitary activity.

By making a reasonable proposal appear wildly irresponsible, the anonymous leakers were trying by misinformation to kill two birds with one stone. Timing their revelations to coincide with allegations about Casey's past financial dealings, they obviously hoped to remove from the scene a man who is known to believe that discreet American support to democratic forces abroad may sometimes be necessary.

Secondly, these faceless leakers are so opposed to covert action of any kind that the damage to American interests seemed a small price to pay for demonstrating that the congressional review process is bound to self-destruct. Certainly many will argue that this threat of unauthorized leaks makes any covert action impos-

sible. Intelligence services is often essential to political action operations designed to keep alive a democratic movement under siege by heavily subsidized Soviet proxies. But European experts warn that it will be a long time before any foreign intelligence service dares expose itself to the hazards of the congressional review process.

If this leak were the only recent one of its kind, it might be explained away as a unique aberration. But in another damaging disclosure Carl Bernstein, in the July 18 issue of the New Republic, spelled out in excruciating detail the channels through which he claims the CIA is helping arm the Afghan rebels. In a mind-boggling mistake of judgment, the Voice of America broadcast this story in its English-language service to Russia and the rest of the world, appearing to officially confirm Soviet charges of American involvement.

Instead of talking about how it intends to unleash the CIA, the Reagan administration's first priority is to find and leash the leakers. In the CIA, officers who had access to the African project are being required to take lie detector tests, and, if there was an internal leak, there is a high probability that the guilty will be identified and fired. But the members and staffs of the two congressional committees have accepted no such discipline. Until they do, their protestations of innocence must be taken with a grain of salt.